

## GOING TO 'THE BROTHERS'

**Mark Stokes**

*The following article is an extract from 'Hey for Boot and Horse, Lad', the unpublished memoirs of Mark Stokes, who grew up in Melbourne. Mark's memoirs span the whole of his childhood, from his birth 'with a caul over my face' in 1927 to 1946, when he joined the Army. They are a rich source of folklore and boyhood recollections. Here he describes some of the rough-and-tumble games he played at a Catholic boys' school.*

I developed a habit of wagging school, and this was great fun and no price to pay. The Nuns didn't know how to deal with it, even if they suspected that I was wagging. Often, when on the wag, I had no plans and little to do. It was just the spice of a little danger, I expect, and the bonus of not being locked in a class room all day. I'm not sure if Mum was still working or not at this time, but she was out for the day and I stayed home. She arrived home unexpectedly, and I just had time to slide under the chesterfield. She came in and sank onto the chesterfield, dropped her parcels and gave a great sigh of relief. It was only a matter of time before she discovered me. So endeth the first lesson. Very shortly I found myself at the Brothers in St Kilda. Tough nuts, the Brothers. Great with the short black piece of leather.

Life has its compensations. It was at the Brothers that I learned the most enjoyable games of my life. A real feast of games every lunch time, and they were all rugged boys' games. For a school boy the year was divided in a mysterious way into seasons.

There was the cricket and the footy season, which everyone understood, but there was the alley season, the card season, the top season, the cherry bob season, the water fight season and so on interminably. How it came about I never knew, nor did anyone else I knew, but on a day it would change and the old fad was over for a year and the new one was in. Mysteriously we all knew and followed the pattern. I suppose it had

something to do with the verities of life, like the question, 'How long is a piece of string?'

The game of which I have the fondest memories was Saddle me Nag. I've never seen it played since in any school, but what a great game it was. Two teams of six were picked, and who were to be riders and who nags was decided by lot. One boy stood at the fence. He was the 'post', and the rest of the team formed a line, head to tail, anchored to and by the 'post'. The other team then took a run and leapt on their backs. Where you landed, there you stayed. The five supported six on their backs. Usually, if you had a team of good leapers, you could build a pyramid on one or two boys in the middle. Then, when all were up on top, they jostled to the tune of 'Saddle me nag, saddle me nag, one, two, three' repeated three times. If the nags sustained the onslaught they had a turn as riders. If not the riders got another go. Great game! We would often end up in a pile of bodies in the dust of the school yard. Looking back at this game, I think it was the best game we played. It was a sophisticated and very rough form of leap frog. The rougher the game the more we enjoyed it.

Then Releaseo! Up to fourteen per team, and it was played rough. One team hunted the other, and catching them had to tig them on the back three times, whereupon they were imprisoned in the base until released by another boy running into the base and shouting, 'Releaseo!'. One day, I was the last boy uncaught. All my companions were imprisoned in the

*continued on page 2*

base and, in the yard with many boys, they couldn't find me, so they formed a cordon around the base. The game was in my hands. I crept in as close as I could without being seen and then I charged. By the time I got there, there was a solid phalanx to meet me and it was a merry jig, but I burst through, sang out 'RELEASO' and the base was empty, except for me and the fourteen opponents on top of me, all pounding my back. All I could do was lie there and hope no-one released me. Rough and tough games, but great fun and you sure learned how to do it.

Branders was another great game, played with a tennis ball. The person with the ball would chase after one or another player, and try to 'brand' him with the ball, and a good hit scored in a vulnerable place could certainly 'brand' you. The person branded then got the ball and chased whoever he selected. You sure learned to run and to throw. Poison Ball was similar, except that everyone stood in the middle with a boy at either end. He would throw the ball at one or another boy. If he was hit he was out until redeemed. He could be redeemed by a boy catching the ball on the full, but to catch it you had to take a chance because if you dropped it you were out, and we threw the ball hard.

More games, like Hoppon Bumpo, which was like British Bulldog played on one foot, and no changing legs. Being small and light I had to develop a different way of playing Hoppon Bumpo or be bowled over every time by the bigger kids. I would hop fast at them and just as their shoulder was about to contact me and they were leaning right into it, I would slip my shoulder aside and then, as I passed, shove my shoulder into their side or back and over they would go.

Water bombs, made surreptitiously during class, and all the traditional games like football and cricket and alleys, and dozens of others, made life worth living and atoned for all the long, dreary hours in the classroom. Untold hours I would gaze out the window at the hot dusty yard, and dream the day away.

In the same class with me was the boy I had feared at St. Columba's. I had thought never to see him again. We never spoke or acknowledged the other, but we seemed to be mysteriously tied to each other, even if we didn't know it. Those angry eyes caused an inordinate fear in my heart. I wonder how he felt about it. I shall never know now.

A week or two after starting at the Brothers, there was a singing practice session. The boys in the class moved around in a random fashion. I was at a loss as to what was happening, so I stayed where I was, which turned out to be right in the middle of the singers. Bro. Wilson called us to order and started us off. After a few moments he stopped us and said, 'Who was that?' As

there were no takers, he started again. He shortly stopped again and repeated his question. Again no-one took up his challenge, but the boy next to me cocked his thumb and said, 'Him.' I was excused choir duty.

We had a tuck shop in a funny little building between the college for the wealthy boys and the school for the deserving. You got to be deserving by being Catholic and not having enough money to pay the fees at the college. They sold a sausage in a piece of bread for tuppence. I didn't know the price and told my mother about this, saying they were a penny each. She gave me tuppence to buy two for lunch. I found out that they were tuppence each and could only get one. I expect I was ashamed to be wrong and never told her and so I went short on lunch whenever she gave me the money to buy it. This was probably the beginning of my need to be always right, which was a bugbear in my life for many years.

One day, the Brothers forgot themselves entirely. We were taken to a picture show. When I say 'we', I mean 'we'. The whole school was taken. Everyone, malefactors and do-gooders. The deserving and the undeserving. Everyone. Not just to any old picture show, not to a religious picture show, but to the local theatre to see *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Tom did everything that any normal boy of those times did every day, except, of course, for the disgusting bits involving a girl. We had nothing to do with girls, but Tom for all his vaunted boyishness, inexplicably had a relationship with a girl. It was

"A morning spent folding paper, taken from our exercise books of course, would provide lots of ammunition for the lunch time water fight."

true, of course, that Becky was an inferior in all their adventures, but that she was included at all is hard to explain. Anyway Tom got into mischief and did all the things we did daily and as a matter of course, and got away with it. We did too, most of the time, but we were not supposed to. If we got caught, out came the thick bit of liquorice and 'justice' was exacted on our hides. I have never been able to understand how come the Brothers let us view what should certainly have been a proscribed film, ranking with outright pornography. Well, we saw it and took the lessons from the film into our secret hearts. We knew then that there was a better way to live life, even if we forgot it later in the race to win money and respect and all that stuff.

One day at home, I found a particularly useful article. I found out many years later what it was called. It was a male glass syringe of 2 ounce capacity. I believe it was used for feminine hygiene, and as my Aunt Kathy was just the one to use such a thing it was she who lost it. I took it to school and as it was the middle of summer and water pistols were in, it became an article of great value. It could beat any water pistol into a



cocked hat. Eventually the class divided into two gangs and hot battles were fought for the possession of the M.G. syringe, which gave such superior fire (water) power. Inevitably after a few days it got itself smashed, but then we had another device to assist us in enjoying life. The Japanese are not the only ones skilled in paper folding. We would fold a sheet of an exercise book into a marvellous shape, which would blow up to a sphere holding about three or four ounces of water. A morning spent folding paper, taken from our exercise books of course, would provide lots of ammunition for the lunch time water fight. The Brothers, although they were tyrants and wielded the strap indiscriminately to our great pain and sorrow, did have enough sense to leave us alone in our more pleasant pastimes. This was the best use I ever found for an exercise book, and if any genuine, state-of-the-art boy wishes to find out how it is done, I would be only too happy to supply the knowledge.

A boy in my class took a set against me, probably because of the syringe, and would wait till I was involved in a game of marbles and then rush unexpectedly through the ring to kick the alleys out and disrupt the game. This went on for a while and we became bitter enemies. He worked as a paper boy at the local authorised news agency and one day I picked up a kite which had fallen from a tree, having been lodged in the tree for weeks, or perhaps days. He arrived with the whole gang of newsboys to demand the kite, but I would not budge. We were to decide the issue in a fight, with his gang of newsboys as his seconds and me on my own. Well, it started in my back yard until my sister Joan heard the fracas and emerged complete with copper stick to rout the lot of them. It

didn't stop the feud, however.

That kite was the only bought kite I can remember seeing. All the kites that flew in Caulfield Park were, as far as I can say, home built. We boys had a standard way of making kites. We would shave a stick off the edge of a paling on the fence, and for a big kite a second stick, and we would construct the kite out of slivers of paling, string, a couple of pages of *The Herald* (a daily newspaper of that time) and some glue made from flour and water. Some old rags for a tail, and a ball of string for sixpence when we could afford it and Bob's your uncle! We had a kite. If the wind was in the right quarter, it would assist on the bike ride up to the park also. We would fight the kites and send messages up the string. The kites were not like the sophisticated double-string kites you see around today, but we had lots of fun making and flying them. The back fence steadily deteriorated during the kite season.

Girls may have been disgusting and of no value, but there was one who lived at the top of our street with whom I struck up a friendship. We talked to one another from time to time, if no boys were around of course. She moved, and a little later I ran into her in Westbury St., near the school. We continued a surreptitious friendship for some time, which her father opposed. He didn't want any nasty little boys around his daughter, but she did and I did, and so our wishes prevailed. I used to meet her sometimes at the St. Moritz ice-skating rink, and we would skate around together holding hands. How low can you get! Thank God none of my pals saw us, but she was pretty. I have forgotten her name now, but I wouldn't mind a spin around the ice rink again.

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Issue No. 37 of Play & Folklore contained an article about the inaugural Maxine Ronnberg Folklife Program, which is a biennial award for Victorian primary school students in years 3, 4, 5 & 6, run by the Victorian Folklife Association. Students are invited to research a particular theme related to Australian society, and record their findings in an illustrated book. Entries are judged by a panel of three - a teacher, a folklorist and a member of a cultural institution.

The theme for the 2002 Maxine Ronnberg Program is

### **Copy Cat from Ballarat and other traditions of childhood**

Here is an opportunity for children to explore the rich traditions in their own lives - the playground games, rhymes & sayings, songs, celebrations, hobbies and pastimes, some of which have been part of childhood since ancient times.

**Entries close 13 September, 2002**

For more information contact  
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The Maxine Ronnberg Folklife Program is designed to deliver learning outcomes for the Key Learning Areas of English, the Arts, and Studies of Society and the Environment.

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The Maxine Ronnberg Folklife Program

# Traditional Games 'improve behaviour'

*The following article appeared on the BBC News website in mid-October, 2001.*

**T**raditional games such as skipping and marbles are being brought back in a Lancashire primary school with the support of a £6000 grant.

And the head teacher of St. Mary's Church of England School in Rawtenstall in Lancashire says that children's behaviour has improved since the games were introduced.

The funding has come from the New Opportunities Fund, supported by the National Lottery, and is providing equipment and training for a three-year project.

During playtimes children are being shown how to play with skipping ropes, bat and ball games, hula hoops and ludo.

Conkers have so far not made it into the playtime activities, but they could also make an appearance this autumn.

And head teacher Julie Frazer says that these games are teaching children to play in a way that is more constructive and sociable.

'The children are happier and more engaged, you can see the difference. They're being encouraged to be more co-operative and are learning about sharing and waiting for their turn.'

The pupils, who were more used to on-screen games than playground games, had to be taught about skipping games and skipping rhymes, which they might not have encountered before.

While it was important for children to learn computer skills, she said that it was also important for them to be able to learn to work and play together.

Before the traditional games project began, the head teacher said that she had been concerned about children playing wrestling games, copied from the television.

But now children were 'enjoying each others' company' and the games allowed 'children to be children'.

And looking at the significance for the school, the head said that the importance of playing was often overlooked.

'Playing is fundamental to learning,' she said.

*In August 1994, Issue No. 26 of this publication (then called the Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter) contained reports of two similar programs introduced to primary schools in different parts of England.*

One was a story of a school in Poole, Dorset, where children were being taught 'old-style' games. A letter by Miss M.D.R. of Sheffield, published in the English



*Bored and fighting? No – these boys are playing British Bulldog!*

family magazine, People's Friend (9 April, 1994), contained the following observations:

'The children are mixing better, enjoying the companionship, and actually saying that they prefer skipping and other traditional activities to the stress and loneliness of playing with computers.'

The teachers find that interest levels, manners and general attitudes are all improving since the introduction of the games.'

The other program, reported in the British Daily Telegraph (8 Sept. 1993), involved a school in Meir, Stoke-on-Trent, which was given a £1200 Rotary grant 'to enlist its dinner ladies to revive the interest of video-age children in traditional playground games. The lunchtime duties of kitchen staff now include teaching games such as Farmer's in his Den, Oranges and Lemons and Simon Says'.

The vice-chairman of the school governors said, 'For quite some time we have noticed that the children just don't know what to do with themselves. They spend three quarters of an hour at lunchtime just getting bored.'

*Do our readers know of any follow-up studies being carried out at these schools, or any other instances of traditional games being taught in schools?*

*What do you think about adult-initiated folklore activities such as these?*

*We must also ask how much of the improvement noticed by the teachers in Poole is due to the positive attention the children are receiving?*

*We look forward to receiving your observations and comments.*



# The more things change... helping out at the Gold Street Clifton Hill School Fete

*Gwenda Davey*

Saturday the first of December was the day I'd volunteered to help with the Gold Street primary school fete, and it reminded me that this time-honoured tradition has a quite a place in children's folklore. Fetes are a part of what I've often called folk commerce, together with neighbours sharing skills, bartering, swapping surplus lemons for eggs, street stalls and other informal ways of exchanging goods. In some ways the school fete is like the potlatch so beloved of anthropologists, where goods are distributed as a gesture of goodwill and a marker of power and affluence to visiting communities. (One might extend the potlatch analogy to the exchange of Christmas presents at the annual family bun-fight.)

Children's folklore includes the traditional foods which are obligatory on festive occasions, such as fairy bread (simply known as 'bread and butter and hundreds and thousands' in my childhood). Here commerce lends a hand, since you have to buy the coloured sprinkles, officially known as 'nonpareils', in a shop, just as you have to buy Rice Bubbles, copha, etc. to make chocolate crackles - possibly my very favourite food ever. Fairy floss has to be made by someone who owns or rents out the machine, and toffees in paper patty pans need bought sugar - plus lots of labour from the mothers and fathers and grandparents supporting the fete! All of these (except fairy bread) were on sale at Gold Street. There's also a whole genre of non-cook sweets and cakes, in addition to chocolate crackles, which are made for school fetes. I wish I'd bought more than just one tray of cherry chocolate slices. I'm not sure whether it's health regulations or just school practice which required that ingredients had to be

written on all home-made produce. I now know that these wonderfully fattening cherry slices contain butter, copha, cherries, malt biscuits and chocolate icing. But in what quantities, is my plaintive request.

The toffees, fairy floss and chocolate crackles are part of the continuity of the traditions of the school fete, together with home-made jams and preserves, but there are also changes. Food stalls sold pizza, Asian, Greek and Mediterranean food, reflecting the multicultural nature of the school community and the generosity of both families and local shopkeepers. Second-hand books and records, toys and clothing, together with plants, herbs, flowers and lucky dips are time-honoured ways of raising money, as well as amusement stalls such as the coconut shy. No coconuts, though, but engaging soft faces - Aunt Sally, I suppose. Some innovations were the 'Secret Kids' Business' (presents for parents) and the Treasure Island sand pit dig. To me, the 'Jaffa Smash' was new, a game of skill where children attempted to hammer a Jaffa rolled down a twisting tube. I didn't see anyone succeed, but it was popular!

This was a really good fete, although I missed a White Elephant stall. Perhaps all the donated white elephants were in the 'presents for parents' room - lucky parents. All ages were catered for; 'Frog in Pond' and 'Tikes on Trikes' for the littlies, and continuous entertainment included jazz bands, Christmas Carols and rock music later in the day (that's when I left). The ticket booths dispensed sun screen, as befits a sun-conscious school, which was aiming to buy sun shades/sails for the playground with the proceeds of the fete. They made a profit of \$26,000 - a great effort.

**Know someone who would enjoy**

***Play and Folklore?***

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# MARBLES MARBLES MARBLES

## Sir Joseph Verco

*Towards the end of his life, Sir Joseph Verco, a well-respected resident of Adelaide, wrote a memoir about his boyhood days in the 1860s. Remarkable for its detailed and descriptive accounts of childhood games and pastimes, the manuscript remains largely unpublished, apart from extracts used by June Factor in Captain Cook Chased a Chook: Children's Folklore in Australia (Penguin 1988) and Australian Childhood: An Anthology (McPhee Gribble 1991), co-edited with Gwyn Dow. In this extract, Sir Joseph describes the rules and rituals for playing games with marbles.*

The boys were addicted to 'playing marbles'. Boys of today will probably not know what marbles are. In those days they were stocked in the shop windows and were a considerable article of commerce, and could be heard to rattle in the trousers pockets of the lads. They were very varied. There were no fewer than (four) different genera - 'agates', 'glass allies', 'stoneys' and 'commonies'.

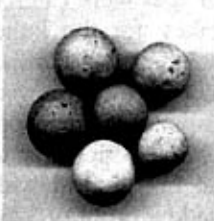


Agates

'Agates' were the most costly and of course the most prized, and one agate was equal to several glass allies, more stoneys and still more commonies. They were ground out of special kind of stone whence their name, or manufactured and burned and coloured with some opaque polish. It was an achievement to win an agate in the game.

The name 'glass ally' indicates its structure. It varied in size from a small cherry to a walnut, was made of clear glass, and had a very wide range of ornament inside it, both as regards the colouring and pattern and figuring.

The 'stoneys' were mostly about the size of small cherries, were white and opaque and without any colour pattern. The 'commonies' were of the same size, but of a mud colour, opaque.



Commonies

The number of different games played by boys with their marbles was very large and gave them plenty of scope for the development of not a few capacities and efficiencies.

One of their games they called 'Nucks' or 'Nux'. How it was to be spelt is unknown, never having been seen in print. Three holes about the size of small saucers

had to be dug in the ground with a penknife. They were about a yard apart, and in a line with one another. From a 'starting' line about half a yard from the first hole the player had to make his first shot. He had a marble which he called his 'taw', and of which he was very careful because as he



Glass allies

became used to it in his many games he was more able to do what he wished with it. This taw he 'fired' with his right thumb and two fingers, so as to locate it in the nearest of the three holes. If it was lodged in this, he went up to this hole, and took from it his taw, and with his thumb as a centre at the further margin of his first hole, he spread out his fingers and described a semicircle, and from this in advance of the first hole he 'fired his taw' to try and lodge it in the second hole. If he succeeded, he continued the same progress into the third hole, and if successful he proceeded to carry out the same manoeuvres on the reverse journey, and this play was continued up and down until such time as he failed to lodge his taw in a hole. Then he had to leave his taw wherever it might have stopped. Now it was his opponent's turn to try his hand in the same way. If at any point he found his taw anywhere near the first player's marble, he had the privilege of firing carefully at this, and if he struck it very gently, or 'kissed it' as the touching was called, he had the privilege of firing as hard as he pleased at the enemy marble and knocking it as far away as he could, and then continuing at his own progress from hole to hole. As soon as he missed fire in any way or place, No. 1 player took his turn again and tried to get into the hole which he had previously failed to enter; and he may have been knocked so far away that it would need two or more attempts before he managed to gain it. The boy who first went up and down the series of holes three times has won the game. It had to be played necessarily kneeling down and no otherwise, and so tended to produce a definite bagging of the trousers at the knees, and the wearing of a hole there, as well as an accumulation of dirt and even of abrasion at the knuckles of the hand. In those days the footpaths belonged to the small boys as much as to the City Council, and they had no compunction in digging their 'nuck' holes wherever they wanted to play, and neither the citizens nor the police ever interfered with their mining operations nor with their play.

Another game played with marbles was 'In the Ring'. On the hard, smooth surface of the original red loamy soil of our untilled and undisturbed land, as in the school playground, a circle was marked out with a penknife or a piece of wood or a stone. The size of the circle would vary with the skill and the age of the players. The smaller and less skilful would have a ring of two or three feet in diameter; the older and more capable would draw one of a couple of yards across.



In the centre a short straight line would be drawn and on this the two opposing players would arrange an equal number of marbles of equal value, whether commonies, stoney or glassies. They would then toss up for 'first fire', or more commonly (as money, even pence, was then rather scarce), one boy would put his hand behind his back and then bring his closed fists to the front, in one of which was a marble. His opponent would guess which fist enclosed a marble. If on opening both hands it was found that he had fortunately guessed correctly, he had the advantage of first 'shot'; if wrongly, the other lad led the attack.

Down on his knees, he would take his taw between the knuckle of his thumb and his forefinger, and from the line of circumference of the ring fire his taw at the marbles in its centre, with the object of knocking some of them out of the ring. All he knocked out belonged to him. If one of them stopped absolutely on the line of the ring, it was put back to the centre. If his taw came out of the ring, whether he had knocked out any of the marbles or not, he ceased firing and his playfellow had his opportunity. If he had knocked one or more marbles out of the ring, and his taw remained in the ring, he had the privilege of firing his taw at any marble still anywhere in the ring and if he knocked it out of the ring it became his; and if his taw was still in the ring he could repeat the process time after time. A skilful player might thus knock out one marble after another until every one originally on the central line

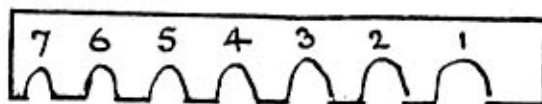
had been accounted for and he had 'skun the ring'. If however the first player had hit the marbles on the line in the centre of the ring and scattered them about, but had knocked none of them out of the ring, or had in any other way finished his 'shot', the marbles were not put back on the central line for the next player, but were left where they had been scattered, and were fired at by him from the ring, wherever they might be. Some would be close to it and, fired at with a side stroke at close quarters, might easily be knocked out of the ring and be secured as his. He would also try, while he knocked out this marble, to so strike it as to keep his taw in the ring, and if skilful enough would at the same time strike the marble in such a way as to rebound so as to 'fetch up' near another marble in the ring, and so secure as many of them as possible. In this way, a great amount of skill could be acquired and displayed in the game, which in some respects resembled the more patrician game of billiards.

Some boys, instead of keeping their knuckle on the line when firing their taw, would jerk their hand forward into the ring so as to get nearer their mark before releasing their taw for the impact. This was denominated 'funnicking', and directly it was noticed it raised the cry of 'fen funnicks' or 'none of your funnicking', and the practice had to cease as unfair.

Another game of marbles was 'In the Hole'. A hole about as big as a breakfast cup was dug in the ground. Each player put down an equal number of marbles,

and lots were drawn as to who should have first throw. The fortunate lad stood toeing a line drawn at a measured distance from the hole; it might be ten or twenty feet away, according to mutual agreement. With all the marbles in his hand, he bowled them towards the hole, and as many as rolled into it and remained there were his. The remainder were now thrown in the same manner by the other player, and the game proceeded until the last marble had been holed, when the players could count up their losses or gains and start again.

A fourth game was 'On the Line'. On a flat surface a straight line was drawn, and the players, two or more, put an equal number of marbles in a row upon it. A toeing line was marked at several feet distance. Precedence was determined by some sort of lot or guesswork. The first man toed the line, and proceeded to throw his 'pitcher' as it was called at the row of marbles, and all he managed to knock off belonged to him. The residue were rearranged in order on the line, and the second player tried his skill, and so in rotation until the line was cleared. Their pitcher was of various materials; most frequently it was a piece of flat slatestone from the Glen Osmond quarry, about half an inch thick and three and a half or four inches in diameter. This would be chipped by its owner into a somewhat rounded shape so as to fit nicely the owner's fingers, and be of appropriate size and weight. He would carry it about with him in his pocket, and by practice with



*Sir Joseph Verco's drawing of the marble board*

the same pitcher would become quite adept in its use; so much so that it was a sore los(s) to its owner and a satisfaction to other boys when by some mischance such as an over-throw or lobbing on a stone, it broke into pieces.

Some boys played a game, if game it could be called, when the skill was all on the one side, and the plausibility on the other. The latter provided himself with a board of some length in which holes were cut of different heights and widths, gradually increasing from one end of the board to the other, and over each hole was a number, the lowest No. 1 over the widest hole and the highest No. 7 over the smallest hole. This board was held upright on the flat ground by its owner and at a certain distance off a firing line was marked. From this a boy fired his taw, and sought to send it through one of the holes. If he shot it through No. 1 hole he was given one marble as his prize, if through No. 2 he received two marbles, and so on to No. 7. If he failed to get his taw through any hole, he had to forfeit a marble. If he were an expert shot he might win quite a number of marbles, but unless he were an expert marksman, he forfeited more than he won, and the owner of the board profited to the extent of the difference.

*Ref. Verco, Sir Joseph, unpublished manuscript, Mortlock Library, South Australia*

# SMALL MYSTERIES OF LIFE

Judy McKinty

Iona and Peter Opie, in their pioneering book *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, point out that '...it is in the nature of children to be attracted by the mysterious'.

For children starting school the playground is a world filled with mystery and wonder, where the rules are made by teachers and other, bigger children. The excitement which comes from playing a new game, finding a new friend, or just watching something interesting can be quickly replaced by the thrill of fear, as one of the big kids whispers a dire warning in your ear, points out a bad omen or predicts something terrible that will happen to you if you don't do as you're told.

One of these moments has remained with me into adulthood. It has to do with 'Bear Day'. I began my education into the mysteries of the playground at a Ballarat primary school in the 1950s, and I remember the day when one of the big boys came up to me and asked me innocently, 'Do you know what day it is today?' Of course I didn't, and so he told me. 'IT'S BEAR DAY! If you step on a crack the bears will get you!' To compound the danger, he also told me that Lyons Street, which I had to cross on my way home, was named that way because on Bear Day there were also lions waiting around the corner to jump out at me. I don't remember what happened after that, but I do remember the instant chill of fear his words produced in me, and the terror I felt as I slowly peeked around the brick fence at the corner of Lyons Street, to see if the lions were still lurking there.

Another scary obstacle on my daily walk to and from school was the 'Witch's House', an old weatherboard house with an overgrown garden, and a particularly smelly bush growing in a tangle through the front fence. The awful smell of the bush convinced the neighbourhood children that we were correct in believing a witch lived there - normal people had nice-smelling flowers and plants in their gardens. If ever there was anyone out in the front garden, I'd wait until they weren't looking and run across to the next house and safety.

One of the less alarming mysteries occurred not in the schoolyard, but in the nearby Arcade. We were forbidden to leave the school grounds at lunch time but the lure was too strong, and sometimes my friend and I would sneak out, cross the road and run half a block to the lolly shop in the Arcade. Like most small children we loved lollies, but that was not why we risked punishment by sneaking away from school. The real attraction was the man behind the counter. He could pull his thumb off, and put it back on again! We would arrive breathless at the shop, and stand looking up at him over a counter filled with the most delectable sweets. We always bought something - a token payment for the show we were about to see.

After paying for the sweets, we'd nervously ask, 'Can you please pull your thumb off?' He'd put his two big hands together so we could just see the top of his thumb, and then suddenly he'd pull them apart, and his thumb would just slide off! He'd move it around a bit and then put it back on again. We were always disappointed when he put it back on, because we knew the show was over. I still haven't figured out how he did it.

Among the children, anyone who had an exceptional or unusual skill was greatly admired. We were in awe of the older children who were really good at games - the girl who could get right through a game of Sevens without dropping the ball, the nimble ones who could 'run in' without fouling the rope in Double Dutch skipping, the boy who could do dangerous tricks on the monkey-bars, like hanging from one leg or walking upright across the top. You were particularly fortunate if you were born 'double-jointed', because you could bend your thumb back to touch your wrist, or make your elbow bend the wrong way, or do other strange and wonderful tricks with your body which no-one but another double-jointed person could do. It was like being a member of an exclusive club, and members were always on show. 'Look what she can do!' became a familiar cry as children presented the mysteries of their friends' joints and limbs for all to see.

Not so exclusive was the ability to tell what kind of a temper someone had. The trick was to pull a hair from the head, hold it tightly between the thumbnail and the index finger and draw it through quickly. If the hair curled up, the person had a temper. The tighter the curl, the worse the temper. If it curled really tight, its owner usually reacted by stomping off yelling, 'I have NOT got a bad temper!' Proof indeed that it really worked.

As we grew older, we learned of other mysteries, like how to cure warts. Our favourite method was to use the juice from the milk thistle. We'd break the stem of the plant and spread the milky white liquid over our warts. Lo and behold, the warts would disappear! Sometimes they took a while to go, but they always went.

Of course, as we moved up through the grades our understanding grew with us, and the things which had seemed mysterious or magical lost some of their charm, but that didn't stop us from trying them out on the younger children. Not Bear Day, though. I never did tell anyone else about Bear Day.

Ref. Opie, Iona & Peter, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, Paladin, U.K., 1977, p230f

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# Games from A Carlton Childhood

Mr. Foletta was born in 1898, three years before Federation. In an interview, conducted in 1978, he talked with History student Margaret Ward about his childhood in North Carlton in the early 1900s. These are extracts from the interview:

We lived in North Carlton, a series of small cottages, bad roads and bad drainage, rough stones, and we used to play what we called Shinty. A stick and a jam tin - kind of hockey.

A memorable occasion in my childhood was playing tricks and practical jokes on people. Where we had a narrow street we would



people would think they had dropped money. We would play children's games in the street.

We played a game called Ducks are Flying - you would find a 2ft. diameter boulder and every child playing would find a smaller stone. One of us would have to put our stone on top of the big stone, and we would throw our stones and try and knock the stone on top. If you tried to pick up your stone whilst the other stone remained on top, and were caught, you had to put your stone on top.

Another game we played was called Tip Cat, which consisted of a piece of wood cut from a broom handle and pointed at



each end, and this would be about 4 1/2 inches long. You had another stick. The pointed stick was laid on the ground in a 2ft. circle, and as you hit the point it jumped into the air and you hit it as far as you could. The one who hit their stick the greatest distance was the winner.

We also played cigarette cards. We would get in the street near a wall and pitch our cards to the wall, and whoever was closest to the wall would pick up all the cards on the ground,

and whatever cards landed face up you could keep.

At Christmas time we would save cherry bobs, and some boys would accumulate several thousand cherry bobs. We used them to play a game called Toolumbuck. A toolumbuck was a circle of thick paper divided into sections with the

name of a horse written on each section. We would put cotton reels in the centre of the paper, a pointed stick through the cotton reel, string around the cotton reel and spin it. We would bet cherry bobs on which horse it would land on.

We also made musical boxes out of matchboxes and elastic. You would cut slits in the top of the matchbox and stretch the elastic in the slits. We used to fight to get the elastic out of golf balls.

The whole of our enjoyment as a child was simplicity in itself, and we made our own fun in various different ways.

Cigarette cards -  
'Mounted Police'; 'Young Australia';  
'The Bushranger'; 'Native Cat';  
'Dingo - Mountain Variety'



# SUNDAYSSUNDAYSSUNDAYSSUNDAYSSUNDAYS SUNDAYSSUNDAYSSUNDAYSSUNDAYSSUNDAYS SUNDAYSSUNDAYSSUNDAYSSUNDAYSSUNDAYS

## Edel Wignell

'Learn the names of the Old Testament books', said Dad one Sunday morning, so we did, discovering that chanting in fours made the task easier.

*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers,  
Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth,  
First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings,  
First and Second Chronicles,  
Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job,  
Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Solomon,  
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel,  
Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos,  
Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum,  
Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah,  
Malachi.'*

When we were ready we came to the bedroom where Dad lay reading The Bible, and recited. The previous Sunday, we had learnt the New Testament books - a much easier task. Later on, when I came to 'years of understanding' (aged thirteen) and professed, being born again and becoming a child of God, I was glad of the memorisation, for I could easily find my way around The Bible.

I was brought up in a semi-secret fundamentalist Christian sect. We lived on a farm in northern Victoria, and there were several families nearby with whom we had fellowship, meeting together in our homes. We told unsaved people we took no other name but Christian, but among ourselves we were 'the Friends' and our sect was 'the Way' or 'the Truth'.

Sunday mornings were long and tedious. What could we do? The Lord's day was a day of rest. We didn't do housework and Mum prepared most of the food on Saturdays. Dad didn't work on the farm, except at irrigation time when he had to 'switch the water', and lamb marketing time when the transport arrived for a pick-up. They read their Bibles, prepared to give their testimonies at the Meeting and wrote letters to family and Workers (preachers).

My sisters and I didn't knit, sew, study or do homework. We played with our dolls and coloured-in. Dad often chose a short psalm for us to memorise and recite, and Mum said, 'I'm writing to Gran and Papa. Would you like to send a letter?' We also wrote to Dad's two sisters and a brother who were all preachers.

Playing Meetings was a favourite activity. We took a plate, cup and saucer from our dolls' tea set, filled the cup with water, and asked Mum for a small piece of bread for Communion. Firstly we sang a hymn, then knelt for prayer. The Friends made up prayers, but we couldn't, so we said the only formal prayer we knew.

Every evening at bedtime we knelt by the bed and Mum heard us pray in unison:

*'Gentle Jesus meek and mild,  
Look upon a little child,  
Pity my simplicity,  
Suffer me to come to thee.  
Help me to be a good girl,  
For Jesus sake,  
Amen.'*

It was 'a form of words', most of which I didn't understand. The first line was untrue: Jesus wasn't 'meek and mild'. The second line made sense. The third line was incomprehensible: I understood 'pity', and 'simplicity' was explained as 'plain and simple' or 'innocent' - 'you're only a child'. Why should I ask Jesus to pity me for that? I didn't want anyone to pity me. I didn't understand 'suffer' in the context of the fourth line. Jesus loved children, so coming to Him should be a joyous thing. Why would I suffer? The fifth line was the most meaningful.

Playing Meetings, after prayer we sang another hymn, then had testimonies. Because we didn't have anything to say, we used a made-up language, usually beginning, 'I thought how compardids and all lardids...', and continued for a few seconds in mournful voices. We finished with 'For Jesus' sake, Amen.' One Sunday morning when we were playing



Meetings on the front veranda, Dad came out and told us not to say 'Amen', so we said, 'Huh-hmm', instead. We gave thanks for the bread and nibbled it, then for the 'wine' and sipped, and finished with another hymn.

The real Fellowship Meeting was at 2 o'clock at Gran and Pa Pa's (Dad's parents) one week, and at Dad's elderly cousins' the next. At the hottest time of the day we arrived wearing our 'Sunday best', including hats, and sat in a circle in the Meeting room, which was the sitting room. At Gran's we three sat with Dad on a big sofa so deep our legs were straight.

The elders conducted the Meetings in turn. If it was Pa Pa's turn, he announced a hymn or invited someone to choose, then Dad began the singing and everyone joined in. Then it was time for prayer and we knelt with elbows on chairs or sofas. After every member had prayed we sat up again and sang another hymn. Then it was time for testimonies. Members stood in turn, read some verses and explained how these had been helpful during the week.

At Communion Pa Pa invited someone to give thanks for the bread. Then the bread, wrapped in a white serviette, was passed around and members took a pinch from the exposed edge. Pa Pa invited someone to give thanks for the wine, and the grape juice was passed from member to member in a cup, each one taking a sip. Finally we sang a hymn.

Our Meeting consisted of twelve or more people to testify, and twelve or more children. It probably took an hour and a half, but it seemed to go on forever. When there were visitors Pa Pa said, 'As there are more people today, please try to keep prayers and testimonies short.' But most didn't.

For me, testimonies were extremely boring as people read more and more verses to amplify their message. The older they were, the more they found. We girls took hankies and folded them in various ways, sometimes copying each other. I 'counted down' (nod, nod, nod) around the room: seven have spoken, five to go; eight have spoken, four to go... The slowest speakers always waited till last. Sometimes I counted to a thousand in my head while the Meeting dragged interminably.

Beforehand, Dad cut a 'Steamroller' into tiny pieces, and we each took several and tied them into the corner of a handkerchief, ready to unwrap and suck if we had to cough. At every third or fourth speaker a tickle started in my throat.

If we girls looked at each other and smiled or mouthed a few words then looked at Mum, she shook her head. Sitting with Dad, we didn't dare move. All the parents were stern; all the children sat still. When our Workers

visited, they said, 'Your Meeting shows that it is possible for children to sit still and listen from a very early age.'

After the Meeting everyone talked on the veranda for a while, and our family often stayed for tea with Gran and Pa Pa. Gran was an invalid (with a 'bad back'), and she had a 'helping girl' who lived in. The helpers were daughters of the Friends. They usually stayed a year or two, and we girls enjoyed their company when they had time to play with us. On Sunday evenings, while the helper and Mum were busy preparing the meal, we played, helped Gran feed the chooks and watched Pa Pa milk two or three cows.

At Gran's big dining table we sang grace. Children were seen and not heard, so we were silent during the meal. If something mysterious was said and I wanted an explanation, I asked Mum later. The discussion centred on the Friends and the Workers, and sharing news from letters: where missions were being held, whether unsaved people were attending or anyone had professed, and the progress of Missions overseas. We were part of a world-wide family - the children of God.

On Sunday evenings Dad lay on the sofa in the kitchen and read a Bible chapter to us while we combed his hair. When he came to an unsuitable verse, he stumbled a little, then paraphrased or skipped over it. In this way we heard all the stories of the Old Testament: the Creation, Cain and Abel, Noah's ark, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, Moses in the bullrushes, the plagues, the flight from Egypt, the commandments, Samuel, Joshua, David slaying the giant, Daniel in the lion's den, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo in the burning fiery furnace, Job..., and the New Testament stories, too.

Although this was forty to fifty years ago, and I left the sect when I was old enough to be independent, the sensory images of our boring Sundays are etched in my memory still.

*Edel Wignell is a freelance writer, former teacher. Her latest non-fiction title is Marvellous Horses illustrated by Rachel Tonkin (Simon & Schuster, Sydney): fantastic flying, speaking, shape-changing and other magical horses from myth, legend, superstition, folk tale, religion and art.*

*Do any of our readers recall how they spent their Sundays during childhood? Was Sunday a special day spent at home, or a day to roam the neighbourhood or explore even further afield? Send us your own recollections by post or email.*



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Edel Wignell



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